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ABSTRACT

This report examines preschools for children with disabilities in Sweden. In Swedish society the roles of the family and the environment are emphasized with the preschool serving as part of a family support system for children with disabilities. The value of a family oriented intervention is stressed. The first section discusses Swedish provision of state support for children with disabilities. Placement, usually in integrated preschool settings is then addressed. The section on the role of the preschool stresses the importance of communicating with parents, providing parents with support, understanding the emotional reactions of the preschool staff, the role of specialists, the role of the special assistant in the preschool class, and preparing for the child's arrival in preschool. An approach to handling problem situations in the preschool is then offered. The need for special resources is examined. The last section looks at the importance of play for children with disabilities, development of communication skills, and disability awareness. (Contains 21 references.) (DB)

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PRESCHOOL CHILDREN

WITH DISABILITIES IN SWEDEN

Jane Brodin, Eva Björck-Åkesson, Marianne Lindberg

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1992

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Jane Brodin, Eva Björck-Åkesson &

Marianne Lindberg

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This report is about preschools for children with disabilities in Sweden. In Swedish society the roles of the family and the environment are emphasized and the preschool is an important part of it especially as part of the family support for children with disabilities. Today a more family oriented intervention is stressed.

Keywords: preschool, children with disability, family support, early intervention, preschool professionals

FOREWORD

Public child care in Sweden includes care of small children of 0-6 years old and include a number of different forms i.e. preschool, day-care centers and part-time groups. The compulsory school starts at the age of seven but it is today possible to start from the age of six..

The municipalities are according to the Social Services Act responsible for running and developing child care and the Swedish Parliament legislates concerning goals, direction and financing of child care. The goals for the Swedish preschool is to support and stimulate children's total development and to strengthen their identity. The goal is also to provide safe care while parents work or study and to do this with high quality. Sweden has the highest employment rate of women in the western world (80%).

In the Swedish society the roles of the family and the environment are emphasized and the preschool is an important part of it. The development of a more family oriented intervention model can be seen.

This publication is a translation from a Swedish publication and applies mainly to staff working in the preschools but aslo to parents. It gives advice to the preschool staff about their role as educators and suppliers of support to the child and the family. It is our intention to give a brief picture of concerns that are in focus when a child with disability enrolls a preschool in Sweden.

Rockneby in 1992

WRP International

Jane Brodin, Eva Björck-Åkesson and Marianne Lindberg

Translation: Christina McCarthy

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1. STATE SUPPORT FOR DISABLED CHILDREN

Sweden has been a leader in the area of law reforms concerning disabled children. Thanks to different laws within the area of care and social welfare, handicapped children are ensured support in their development. These laws reflect the democratic values formed during the sixties and seventies when the financial situation was more favourable than today. When we look at this today, however, we find that not all disabled groups receive equal support due to the fact that the laws did not include all of them.

The basic principle in Swedish handicap politics is that disabled people ought to have the same rights as all citizens. The social services law is based on this principle. Furthermore this law gives the municipality the primary responsibility for everyone living within its jurisdiction. The law mentions equality, solidarity, security, and democracy, and the key words in connection with disabilities are 'normalization' and 'integration'. Above all, the quality of life offered to the family must come first. The social services law has transferred the responsibility for the disabled citizens from the larger counties to the smaller municipalities. This means, among other things, that almost all handicapped children in Sweden today are placed in municipal day care. About 80% of all mothers of small children work outside their homes.

Before this new law passed, the type of disability decided which social services office the child's family should approach for assistance. Families with children with developmental handicaps were primarily looked after by the care services, physically disabled children by the habilitation services, visually disabled children by the eye clinics and resource teachers, and hearing impaired children by the hearing clinics. The goal now is for the municipalities to take the primary responsibility for all children and get assistance from county specialist services if necessary. The main reason for this change is that almost all disabled children today grow up at home within their families and need the advantage of the public day care system.

Many counties are now reorganizing their assistance to families with disabled children. The municipalities are simultaneously enlarging their operations. This makes it impossible to describe in general terms how the support for these families works today. Consequently, it can be difficult for the preschool staff to know where to go for help and support.

An impairment may bring about various restrictions. It may affect the child's physical, mental and emotional development. A child with a physical disability or a visual or hearing impairment may also have

delayed development in other areas. Children with a mental handicap have also often a delayed motor development.

All children need a secure and stable environment and to be loved and accepted for what they are. They need their parents' approval and joy for their accomplishments. This is particularly important during the first years. The child continually observes the parents' reactions when doing something and notices if they are pleased or not. Positive reinforcement by smiling or through physical contact stimulates the child's curiosity and development. This is just as important for the developmentally delayed child as it is to other children. The parents' worry and insecurity may have a negative influence on their interaction with their child. For this reason, but also in order to avoid parents developing guilt feelings, it is important that the diagnosis is made as early as possible. The parents can then familiarize themselves with the handicapping condition and also acquire information about intervention and support. They, of course, need some time for adjustment when they find out that their child is impaired.

The disabled child has potentials to realise like all children. In order to create the best possible conditions for the child's development a basic feeling of security is required but also a home that provides stimulus and support. How well the family copes is of vital importance for the development as well as the physical wellbeing of the child. It is necessary that the social services provide both financial, psychological and educational assistance to these families. The preschool is an important part of this support.

2. PLACEMENT IN PRESCHOOL

Section 15 of the social services law establishes that "Those children who for physical, psychological or other reasons require special help in their development should be given a placement earlier (before the age of six) than Section 14 Part 1 states, or be first in line for a space in a day care centre, unless the child's need for such assistance is met by other means".

Presently almost all handicapped children in Sweden are cared for in public day care centres regardless of the type of disability. Severely hearing impaired and deaf children are not integrated to the same extent as other children because of their use of sign language, which today is regarded as the primary language of the deaf. Deaf and severely hearing impaired children usually attend special nursery schools just for the hearing impaired.

Preschool is intended for all children and the discussion below, about integration, must therefore only be regarded as an attempt, with the

available terminology, to describe various types of preschool placements available for disabled children. Placement in preschool for a disabled child may mean one of many different situations:

* 'Individual Integration' into a group of children. This is common in preschool.
* 'Group Integration' is a small group of disabled children attending preschool with other children.
* 'Physical Integration' is not common in preschool but in compulsory school. This involves a group of disabled children forming their own class but integrated into a regular preschool.

The purpose of the preschool is to provide educational stimulation and assist the child in his/her social, physical, cognitive and language development in accordance with the child's own capabilities. Integration of disabled children is to enable them to acquire a feeling of kinship with other children and adults in the nursery school, while being educationally stimulated. Children become stimulated and active by being with other children. Play sparks curiosity and the joy of discovery. The idea behind integration is to give disabled children the opportunity to play with other children and take part in the group activities of the preschool.

The preschool groups are often quite large these days and several children in the same group may require special assistance. This results in increased demands on the staff. The preschool teacher does not always possess enough knowledge and experience of disabled children. Disabled children do not form a very large group; they do, however, require much additional attention and assistance.

Placing a disabled child in a preschool can work out very well if the staff get adequate training and continued help and guidance. Integration must not simply mean that the child is only physically present in the nursery school but in other respects isolated. Many integrated children never become fully involved with the rest of the group. Resources must usually be expanded, for instance by means of a personal assistant, for the child to get a positive preschool experience. The assistant can become the link which connects the child with the others and thus help him/her to become included in the group. Today it is the economy that rules. This means that the budget allotted by the municipality to the preschool is often inadequate. Consequently the demands from the preschool staff about smaller classes and better resources are not always considered.

Integration and normalization does not mean that the child's disability vanishes because he/she spends time with other children. The social contact is very important to the extent that it actually works. The contact with other children stimulates the child to play and participate in other activities. The disabilities are, however, still there and therefore the child

requires additional educational support and stimulation. Discussion between preschool staff and the parents is imperative so that a common goal is reached for each child. It ought to be reasonable to expect that there is a gradual progress in the child's development.

3. THE ROLE OF THE PRESCHOOL

The preschool teacher and staff are often the first people outside the family with whom the disabled child has a daily contact. The preschool, therefore, becomes an integral part of every day life both for the child and his/her family. For the parents to do well and get along in their jobs it is important that they know that their child is in good hands. In some cases the preschool becomes a well needed break for the parents. It is often a comfort for parents to be able to share their responsibilities and duties with someone outside the family.

It is difficult for all parents to leave their child in a new environment and with unfamiliar people. 'The period of adjustment to school' (Swedish parents get a paid leave from work to accompany their children when they first start school) is very important as it enables the child, the parents and the school staff to get to know each other. In the case of a disabled child 'the period of adjustment to school' usually also involves other people who the child has had contact with, for example the early childhood special education consultant, the toy librarian, the physiotherapist and the occupational therapist. A well planned 'period of adjustment to school' includes, amongst other things, discussions of the familiar and ongoing questions and concerns, but also, new ones that turn up during this time.

The child should receive stimulation and encouragement in a variety of ways during his/her time in preschool. By being included in the group and by playing with other children the child acquires social skills. The child gets educational training through the group activities but sometimes also from individualized teaching. In this way the preschool plays a tremendously important role in the life of the disabled child and his/her parents.

3.1 The importance of communicating with parents

A good relationship between the nursery school staff and parents is based on mutual trust and respect. The parents have essential knowledge and experience to share and it is also important for them to feel capable and well informed. It always shatters parents selfconfidence when a disabled child is born and it often, at least in the early stages, undermines their belief in themselves.

Primarily the parents have the same feelings and needs as other parents but besides that they also have experienced all the difficulties, and also the joys, that come from living with a disabled child. All parents appreciate it when others show respect and interest in their child. They are happy and proud when someone enjoys their child and the progress he/she makes.

It may be difficult for parents to leave their child in the preschool. They may feel guilty and worried. Sometimes this is due to overprotection, and discovering that others also care for their child could reduce their worries and anxieties. Parents not only need education and physical care for their child but also emotional support. By paying attention to positive news as well as problems that crop up the preschool staff can become a very strong support for the parents. Remember that they are mothers and fathers first and foremost and like other parents they need to feel that there is friendship, encouragement and security in their preschool.

It is always a good idea to discuss a problem immediately and talk about insecurities. Otherwise a viscious circle may develop and the insecurities of both preschool staff and parents contribute to misunderstandings and disappointments. Sometimes parents of a disabled child become more dependant on the preschool staff than is usual. The relationship can become quite intense which may have both positive and negative effects. Occasionally parents take out their anger and disappointment on the nursery school staff although it ought to have been directed somewhere else. It also happens that the preschool staff develop negative feelings towards the parents of a child. Working with disabled children often sparks many different feelings in people. When difficulties arise which cannot be overcome, negative feelings take over and it is, therefore, important that all problems, both practical and emotional, are discussed immediately. A collaborative goal-setting is desired.

3.2 Support for parents

Parents are the most important people for the children; for their entire development, communication and education.

Try to develop a good relationship with the parents right from the start and take advantage of their experience, knowledge, help and support. Plan the child's preschool days together with the parents and give them a realistic view of what is in store for their child; both advantages and disadvantages. Explain to the parents what goals you see for the year(s) in nursery school and what limitations you anticipate. Ask for their goals and work out commmon goals for shorter period of time. A collaborative goal setting is necessary and problem solving based on mutual understanding.

Try to make the parents participate in the preschool by getting them to contribute with their talents but also accept those parents who do not have the energy or do not feel up to much contact with the preschool. Try different avenues to reach the various parents. Some parents want a lot of contact for a period of time and later less so try to accept that the need for communication can vary. There is often a reason why a parent does not want contact with the preschool. Try to be sensitive to the moodswings of the parents. If opinions differ about something it is better to discuss it instead of developing unrealistic expectations which may result in feelings of inadequacy both in parents and preschool staff.

Show the parents that you care for their child and if you meet them on a daily basis tell them about the day's activities. If the child travels by transport service it is a good idea to have a booklet for writing down what went on during the day. Tell them about every bit of progress you notice.

Trust yourself and your common sense. Show the parents that you respect them by acknowledging that you are not a 'super' man or woman who can do anything and knows everything. Ask for their help and advice when you feel you need it. It is also important to make it clear from the beginning what the school expects from the parents.

- Show respect for both child and parents by active listening.
- Take time to listen, arrange talks without the child present, i.e. go for a cup of coffee together.
- Be candid, discuss problems immediately.
- Show imagination, try to understand that every family is different and unique.
- Co–operate with the parents, plan together.
- Try to identify with the parents' situation and feelings and their earlier attempts at solving problems.
- Try to find the parents' positive sides and take advantage of them.
- Try to find the child's talents and work on them.
- Try to meet both the child and the familiy where they are now.

It is important that the parents feel that they are part of everything that happens around their child. It is not good if they start thinking that others know their child's needs better. Parents are a unique resource for their child; the real experts. They must feel that they have the primary responsibility for their child even if he/she is disabled. The preschool staff should be sensitive and notice how the parents express their need for assistance and act accordingly. It is easy to have an opinion about other people's family problems and forget that all families are different. Remember that the preschool staff may change but parents are the permanent fulcrum in the child's life.

3.3 Emotional reactions of the preschool staff

Most people who meet a child with a severe handicap feel an urge to help and improve the child's situation. However, it is difficult to know how to help and hard to see the results of one's efforts. The frustrations of feeling incapable of helping can cause anxiety and anger. These feelings may become an obstacle in the work with the child. It is important that the staff talk about these things; important to know that others may have the same feelings. On one hand it is good to talk about your feelings and on the other to discuss what are realistic goals for this child and others in the group.

When you see someone else's vulnerability you often get an impulse to protect. These feelings may be hard to recognize and suppress. It is important to be sensitive and pay attention to one's reactions to the child's and his/her parents' difficulties. It is sometimes difficult to understand these reactions. Denial, for instance, is one type of defense mechanism, which means that you push the problems aside and then someone else might have to take the responsibility for this child alone instead of sharing it. Sometimes it also appears pointless to make an effort with children who are passive and have limited ability to interact and who respond so little. The child's passivity may cause one to become insecure and this in turn may give the appearance of anger or withdrawal to the parents.

It is not uncommon that negative feelings become directed against the 'experts' and that their demands to include the disabled child in various activites are perceived as unrealistic. It is, therefore, important to keep the communication lines open from the beginning with this group.

The daily work with a group of children that includes a disabled child may force the staff to deal with feelings that they normally would not have. They must be sensitive to the feelings of the disabled child as well as the other children. When the staff feel comfortable within their own group they are able to discuss and work on these feelings. However, if the staff feel excluded and does not get support, it is difficult to make the integration of a disabled child work. The support may come from the own staff group but also from others involved with the child. When emotional reactions become too difficult to handle one ought to look for further help and supervision from, for instance, a psychologist.

3.4 Co-operation with specialists

Before a disabled child starts preschool the family has already been in contact with the habilitation specialists who are trained to deal with this particular disability and to lend general support. Some of these specialist take part, as a rule, in the 'preschool adjustment period' and it is their job

to give information to the preschool staff about the child and the disability. They also often become a connecting link between the parents and the preschool staff. A most important profession is the preschool consultant (teacher with certificate in early childhood special education) who does most of the communicating with the preschool. The preschool keeps in touch with the habilitation experts in most cases and this often works quite well and is helpful for both the staff and the parents of the child.

The preschool consultant can advise about the organization and the content of educational activities for a disabled child in a preschool setting. They also have information about how to adapt activities in order that a disabled child may be included in play and games and what technical aid, toys and other play material is available for the child. In most cases the communications with the preschool special education consultant take place on a regular basis. Other resource people who may visit the child regularly in the preschool include physiotherapists, speech therapists, and occupational therapists.

The preschool teachers may occasionally feel threatened professionally when other educators work with the child in the preschool or give advice. It may feel awkward to require assistance within your field of expertise as a child educator. The trained preschool teacher may want to be the child's educator, but may experience feelings of inadequacy with a disabled child. Questioning one's own competence is a delicate issue, and could be continually occurring when a disabled child is in the group. It is natural to try to avoid situations which cause one to feel inadequate and incompetent, and it is also natural to react differently each time.

An assistant or a teacher in training may have an easier time accepting things he/she cannot handle or understand and may be better able to co–operate with the special education teacher. In many cases, therefore, the assistant, who usually does not have any special training for this, ends up taking the main responsibility for the disabled child. The preschool teacher's emotional reactions may be part of the explanation when this occurs, but there are other contributing factors, such as the demands on the teacher for educational activities with all the children in the group. There are often several children in the group who require special assistance and this makes it difficult to look after everyone's needs. Before a disabled child arrives in the preschool, the best arrangement for the group and staff should be carefully considered.

Today many preschool teachers are demanding more training in the area of special education. It is common, however, that preschool teachers take courses after working hours with the idea of becoming specialists as educators of children with special needs. Considering the fact that preschool teachers in increasing numbers become responsible for children

with various disabilities it is obvious that this training ought to be included in the basic training/education. When a disabled child comes to the preschool many teachers feel that they are forced to take on a job for which they were not trained simply because their basic training did not include enough theory or practical training in this area.

"I chose to become a preschool teacher because I wanted to work with normal children in a group setting; I am not prepared for suddenly having a disabled child in my group". Such an attitude is understandable, but the new social services law forces the preschools to also accept disabled children. This type of reasoning is one reason why preschool teachers are afraid to take on disabled children. The teachers who are used to working with a group of normal children may feel pressured when faced with additional duties such as observations, communicating with specialists and other adults, individualized teaching, special plans for the entire group etc. "There is not enough time for it all". This aspect of integration is also important to discuss and ought to be addressed during the training.

3.5 The role of the assistant in the preschool

When a disabled child is enrolled in a preschool group usually a new staff becomes involved in the preschool. The additional staff member's title may vary. He/she may be a 'personal assistant', 'a resource person' or simply 'extra staff'. In this text we simply use the term 'assistant'. The assistants' training can also vary. Some assistants have preschool teacher training or an elementary school teachers' certificate, or a pediatric nursing training certificate. Others have no education relevant to their work as a disabled child's assistant. The employment conditions vary from municipality to municipality.

There is a variety of job descriptions for assistants. He or she may be employed to accompany the disabled child at all times or be part of the regular staff group. There are also a number of combinations of different employment conditions.

Many assistants find it stimulating and fulfilling to work with a disabled child. Some, however, find it a lonely experience and feel excluded from the staff group and the other children. The disabled child and his/her assistant may occasionally become like an island within the group. It is important to describe the assistant's role right from the start to the preschool staff, the disabled child and his/her parents. In order to avoid the risk of any misunderstandings it is important that everyone knows what is expected of the assistant. Other members of the preschool staff should also be acquainted with the disabled child and his/her special needs in order to be able to take care of him/her. It is important to establish how various responsibilities are to be divided among the staff members when a

disabled child begins preschool. This discussion and the planning should be finished before the child starts in the preschool.

In Sweden there are presently no general rules regarding the hiring of assistants. Neither are there any rules concerning qualifications of the assistants. The municipalities work this out for themselves and the type of employment decided upon depends mainly on the disabled child. Some children require the continuity of having only one person helping them in the preschool and perhaps also during the transportation to and from the school. For other children it is essential that the assistant takes part in the larger group and in those cases the assistant becomes a helper for the group as a whole. The need for an assistant may also change for the child as he/she progresses through different developmental stages.

No matter what the employment contract or the job description is, it is important that the assistant feels included in the staff group and does not become isolated with the child. It is important to have support from the other staff members when you face the often difficult and unfamiliar work of taking care of a disabled child.

The assistant should be given opportunity to receive special training for her work with disabled children. It is important to have knowledge about the particular handicap of the child. The training may include accompanying the child to various specialists and schools. Other professionals in the staff group should also be given training. This training is occasionally arranged by the various county organizations such as the care offices and the child habilitation organization.

3.6 Preparing for the child's arrival in preschool

Integration means participation,common benefit and co–operation and implies that the disabled child becomes a part of the group with the other children and feels accepted and secure. In some cases this does not require any extra efforts beyond the norm, but sometimes it takes much work to accomplish this. It is important to make preparations for the placing of the child no matter what disability is involved no matter how severe the handicap is.

Those making decisions about placing disabled children in preschool must understand the importance of giving the preschool staff advance notice. The staff needs time to prepare for the 'preschool adjustment period' through meetings and reading through all the information material etc. as well as planning the purely practical aspects. The practical side involves discussions about additional resources required; extra staff, adjusting the physical environment and equipment. It is desirable that the staff has an opportunity to meet with the child and his/her family before any decisions

are made about additional resources and also consult the staff at the county office and other social services offices who have information about this particular handicap before the child arrives at the school.

In order to arrange a well planned placement it is necessary that the contacts with the child and his/her family are relaxed and not rushed. There must be enough time to talk and get to know each other. To establish a good relationship requires several meetings. The nursery school staff ought to have time set aside for getting aquainted with the family. It is impossible to have conversations with parents while being responsible for a group of children. Therefore extra time is required for discussions with the parents.

A newly hired assistant should be introduced to the school staff and the children before the disabled child comes to the preschool. The assistant should be given the opportunity to become aquainted with the other childrfen and the staff and feel secure in the group before he/she begins the new assignment.

4. PROBLEM SITUATIONS IN PRESCHOOL

The preschool staff spend much time with children. How they feel about children and how they behave with them has a great influence on the childrens' experience in the preschool. The attitude of the staff is no less important for disabled children.

* Respect the child and don't talk over his/her head as if he/she are not present or cannot understand
* Allow the child to participate in conversations
* Include the child in all activities he/she can manage and help him or her to participate if necessary
* Place the child on the same level as the other children so that by seeing and hearing contact can be made. For example, when baking, a child who cannot stand up may be placed on a movable board, a severly disabled child can play lying in the sandbox.
* Help the child who is unable to turn around by himself so he can follow the other children.
* Don't forget to have reasonable expectations, even for the disabled child.

Sometimes it can be difficult for the staff to decide which activities the disabled child can take part in. This is especially true with respect to a severely disabled child for example when to participate in excursions. Try to use the guideline that children should take part in those activities from which they benefit. Although the severely disabled child might not be able to express an opinion about the activities, it is possible that he/she still

enjoys participating. Be sure to talk to the parents, get their opinions and together with them set up guidelines for their child's participation in different activities.

Opinions are sometimes divided about where to place a mentally disabled child; whether to place him/her within her own age group or with a group of children at the same developmental stage. Naturally one must look at each child individually and see how the children are grouped in the particular preschool. It is difficult to make a general rule, but it is normally recommended that a child is placed in a group who is at approximately the same developmental stage unless the age difference is too great. A mentally retarded seven year old child who is at a developmental stage equivalent to a three year old has many more experiences than a normal three year old. It can, therefore, be a mistake to place a disabled child in a group with much younger children although his/her mental age is considered to be approximate the age of the younger children.

5. EQUALITY FOR ALL REQUIRES SPECIAL RESOURCES FOR A FEW

When a child is placed in a prechool it is not sufficient that he/she only is offered social stimulation. This is, however, often the most important incitament in a preschool placement. In order for the child to develop his/her maximum potential, i.e. utilizing all inborn talents and abilities, it is necessary that the child is stimulated and helped in different areas, for instance in motor, language and cognitive development. For each child an individual educational plan is necessary in which the various requirements of support are specified. Early stimulation is essential for all children but even more crucial for the severely disabled. Young children cannot wait for help in their development and one must, therefore, not waste any of the child's opportunities. This does not mean that the child should be in constant training. Like other children a disabled child needs time alone to discover and explore undisturbed.

In order for each child to spend meaningful time in preschool with social interaction and educational stimulation, teachers must first assess the child's skills and abilities. The child should get the stimulation needed based on his/her developmental stage and earlier experiences. One must be careful not to draw premature conclusions from any earlier diagnosis which in turn may influence one's expectations of the child. Consequently it is essential to find each individual child's abilities and become adept at noticing every step of progress. Based on the assessment an individual educational plan should be developed together with the parents and specialists.

Such a plan includes the establishment of goals and methods for the support to the child in different areas. The individual educational plan may be part of an individual family service plan that is established by the specialist at the habilitation centre in collaboration with the parents.

The child's development must be carefully monitered if the work accomplished in the preschool is to be effective. In order to know what stimulation the child needs, and which methods to use, it is necessary to pay constant attention to the child's development. There must be continuous progress even it is slow. This does not involve taking the child away from the group for individual teaching. One should primarily plan to satisfy the child's needs for play and stimulation within the group although individual training in some areas may occasionally be necessary. It is essential that everyone working with a child have a common goal and methodology which is specified in the individual educational plan.

A different question altogether arises when the child requires some technical aid, for instance to aid communication when interacting and playing with others. The staff in the social services office, the child habilitation or the coordinated children services office have information about this.

6. THE IMPORTANCE OF PLAY FOR DISABLED CHILDREN

"The children are playing. Echoes of life itself sound through their games.
Shrill and boisterous or sadly muffled they are heard for as long as you let them.
Everything they know and believe about reality they make a game of.
This is the amazing part
Adults believe that play is passing time. How wrong.
Play is life"

("Kajenn", Kaj Lundgren)

We regard it as natural and unquestionable that children play. It is something innate in children and we don't even think about it.

But what is play actually?

- Play is to learn
- Play is work for the child
- Play is training for adult life
- Play gets rid of extra energy
- Play stimulates the imagination
- Play is practising interaction with others
- Play is dealing with ones feelings, experiences and problems
- Play is having fun

Play may mean different things to different people. People often say "this is not for real" or somewhat accusingly "she is just playing". One of our new (Swedish) dictionaries explains the word play as "something not done seriously". This might be interpreted as a confirmation that play is not appreciated in our society and not considered an important activity. However, we believe that play is a very serious business. Furthermore, play is the cause for much joy and fellowship and at the same time forms the basis on which the child interacts with other people.

Most children play spontaneously but those who don't must get help to start playing. By playing the child practises for adult life and also learns to cope with, and adjust to, reality. The child explores, examines and tries to understand and control his surroundings in play.

New skills are learned through play. When the infant tries to reach the rattle hanging over the crib he is not playing but acquiring a skill. It does not become play until the child is able to control his hand movements and coordinate them with his vision and thus succeed in grabbing the rattle. Success is pleasurable and thus the child starts to play. By repetition, the new experience is reinforced until the child becomes so skilled that he dares to explore his surroundings further. There is a difference between practising a new skill and play. Many disabled children need to practise skills before they can start to play by themselves. The educational activities in the preschool ought to include practising skills as well as play.

What the child can do – he/she practises
What the child can't do – he/she trains

Playing is a most important way to gain experiences for the child; experience means knowledge about the world and himself. It is possible to detect at an early stage if the child is worried, or sad, by paying attention, and being sensitive, to what the child expresses while playing. This is often true with disabled children. Children without speech often express themselves through play. The preschool should offer the children activities; stimulation and educational activities, but occasionally children must be left undisturbed to absorb new impressions. This is especially important to remember when involved with disabled children. If a child is continually 'fed' with activities he or she may lose his/her ability to initiate. The child's own activities form the basis for learning and acquiring new skills and it is, therefore, essential to not let adults or other children do most of the playing for the child.

We assume that all children know how to play but this is not always the case. Disabled children do not always play spontaneously. Some children are very passive and do not initiate activities so the preschool staff have an important role here; to try to get the child interested and support every

spontaneous activity the child initiates. A child may become passive if he/she notices that no–one cares and there is no reward for being active. We call that type of passivity 'learned helplessness'. If no–one understands what the child expresses this can also result in passivity. Perhaps the child needs a long time to express himself and the problem is that very few people like to wait.

Passivity is, however, not always something negative. It can occasionally be good for a child to be passive when playing. The following is an ordinary, everyday example: a small boy who was new in the preschool, spent day after day lying under the table, watching the other children play house above him. When the teacher tries to get him involved he said: "Don't you see that I am the dog?" The boy continued to play the dog for a long time. He lay under the table and watched the others play, taking part in his own way. After he had spent some time just watching the other children's behaviour and learning their rules, he was quite happy to move out from under the table and take part in other nursery school activities – confident that he would know how to act.

Children do not require stimulation and activity continously. One should only interfere when a child is passive in a negative way. A child needs time alone, uninterrupted to absorb new experiences. The child's development follows a certain pattern and cannot be rushed. On the other hand one can help preserve already acquired skills by following his/her development carefully. Sometimes different specialists give advice independently, for instance a physiotherapist and a nursery school consultant. This can cause insecurity among the staff who do not know how to plan these activities for the child, nor which ones take priority. This is avoided if the specialists plan together. A disabled child has often a schedule to follow with a time set aside for different types of therapy. They cannot skip an appointment the way we ourselves sometimes do. A complete picture must be at the base when sorting out the child's priorities at different times.

6.1 Play in preschool

For disabled children play usually means taking part in the daily activities with the other children. To be able to participate, however, may require that both methods and equipment needs to be modified. Some children also require various kinds of individual training before being able to participate in play.

Disabled children may require different play equipment than other children or adapted play material. It can be difficult to find toys that they like and accept. Sometimes the progress is slow and the training has to be continously changed to keep the child interested. The play equipment must

be suitable and interesting. It must fit the developmental stage and provide training for the impairments. There should also be a gradual increase in the level of difficulty and challenge of the toys.

The child should be allowed to play with the toys in his/her own unique manner. By observing how the child plays with, for instance, building blocks, one can establish what types of play activities the child is ready for and also get an indication of what developmental stage he/she is at. It is essential to begin training on the correct level. Children learn many things by themselves if given plenty of time and the proper play equipment. They learn much from their own mistakes. From experimenting with toys, the children gain experience and knowledge. They often learn faster from their own manipulation of the toys than if they are shown how to use them. Disabled children are often not given enough time to discover for themselves before an adult, or another child, offers to help. Disabled children often react slower and, therefore, must be given more time to really try things by themselves.

> "Children need many things to use in the same way
> – and the same thing to use in many ways"

It is important to remember that the toys themselves mean little; it is the way they are used that is important. Play equipment should stimulate the child to activity and communication.

The other children in the preschool group are an important resource for the disabled child. If there is play equipment especially modified for a disabled child, the other children should also be allowed to use it and should learn how it works. The chances of cooperative play and communication are enhanced when they play with it too.

Playing is serious business for the child and we, the adults, should respect that. Play is also joyous, and always pleasurable. One needs good instructions to do a good job. The pleasures of play is harder to teach; it requires an emotional sensitivity that not everyone possesses. The preschool teacher should communicate his/her expertise in play to parents, and other child caregivers in an instructive and comprehensible way.

A cosy and attractive environment makes learning easier. Maria Montessori stressed how important the environment is for the child's development. To spark the child's interest in playing 'right here right now' may require that distractions are removed from his/her environment.

It may be difficult to find toys and activities suitable for the severely disabled child. This is especially true in thecase of a child who easily loses interest and appears listless. Many counties in Sweden have a toy library

which offers advice and suitable play equipment for disabled children. Most places around the country work with the goal of giving equal service to all children. The publication "Play is for all. Toy libraries in an international perspective" (WRP International) describes how the toy library operates today in Sweden and other countries.

The county councils and especially the toy libraries provide educational assistance to the mentally retarded, physically disabled, hearing and visually impaired are servicing the entire country. They provide, among other things, information about the different types of toys and play equipment suitable for disabled children.

6.2 Communication in preschool

Interaction with others is fundamental for the development of all children. The preschool plays an important role in stimulating children with communication handicaps to interact with adults and other children. The ability to communicate is often taken for granted. Most disabled children have no great difficulty communicating, although they may require speech therapy. Certain children, however, need help to learn how to interact with others, especially those with severe physical handicaps. In many cases this need is left undiscovered.

Today there are a number of alternative ways of communication for children who are unable to use speech. Sign language is used at an early stage by hearing impaired and deaf children but also by children with other types of handicaps. Pictogram and Bliss are symbol languages used by children who cannot make signs with their hands. They 'talk' by pointing at symbols and using them in various combinations. Normally they use the finger or hand for pointing, but there are other possibilities, for instance, the eyes or foot. Sometimes symbol language is combined with some means of pointing at things in simple ways, for instance with a stick. More advanced methods for communication such as computer aided systems are also available.

When a child is using alternative communication it is essential to provide opportunities for using it in a variety of settings and with different people. The replies must be consistent to make sense to the child. It is necessary to provide the preschool staff with opportunities to learn the alternative communication system. Concerns about making mistakes could add to their reluctance to use it. The preschool staff should be offered education in alternative communication before and during it's use in the preschool.

During contacts with a child who has communication difficulties it is imperative to allow the child enough time to respond. One should also react favourably to the child's own initiatives. The child must have the

experience of affecting his/her own environment by communicating. It is important to avoid 'test situations' in which the child is bombarded with questions and instead take one thing at a time and not give up until it is certain the child has responded. This is difficult to remember, especially for adults who are used to fast communication. It is mainly speech therapists who can give out information and assist the preschool staff in the areas of communication, language and speech.

Research has proven that starting with an alternative communication method is never harmful for a child. Even if the child learns to talk later on. Using an alternative method of communication enhances the child's development.

6.3 Disability awareness

Disabled children discover relatively early in life that they are different from other children. They become familiar with their own limitations but also with their abilities. It is important that everyone in the child's environment is alert and pays attention to his/her reactions. The child needs a sympathetic adult to listen when expressing his/her own thoughts about the handicap.The child needs to express his feelings and talk about his/her problems. It is detrimental to ignore the child's own ideas. The adult should allow the child to ask questions, take his/her worries seriously and communicate the feeling that everyone will take part in coping with the difficulties. If the child feels that he/she is loved in spite of the handicap and get the idea that things are all right he/she will have an easier time accepting the situation and making progress in his/her development. It is the adults' job to support the child, reduce the demands on the child and, as much as possible, adjust the environment to suit the child's needs.

7. CONCLUSION

Those working with small children with special needs will find that a good education as well as considerable experience is very helpful. They should be very familiar with the development of not only disabled children but of normal children as well. Sensitivity for the special needs of the child and his/her parents is also necessary. Involvement and good team fellowship among the staff combined with frankness about both joyous and problematic areas of their work can make it an enriching experience for everyone to have a disabled child in the group. Integration means having the disabled child 'forming a natural part' of the preschool group. Integration in this sense is a positive word.

The function of the preschool is to give children a good start in life and help their development. In many cases it is difficult to know how to

provide the child with a positive preschool experience. An overall picture of the child ought to be the basis for planning the child's preschool time table. A good relationship with the family and co-operation with specialists involved with the child is also a necessary condition for a successful preschool period. To focus on the child's particular needs and fulfill these are reasonable guidelines to follow.

Parents are a unique resource for their child and they should be encouraged in their role as parents. They play the most important role for the child and no expert or professional can replace them. Even severly disabled children bring joy to their parents and play could be the bond that makes them a family.

It is not necessarily true that families of severely disabled children have the toughest time. It is not the degree of the diasability that decides how the family is coping. Of course they must have medical, educational, respit service and financial assistance, but how they cope, i.e. emotionally, depends more on the family itself. How the family copes depends mainly on their inner resources; how they managed the crisis when the disabled child was born, and/or when they recorded the message about their child´s disability and also what support they are offered. Families of children with 'invisible' disabilities are under great stress. The parents may have lived with uncertainty during many years due to a delayed diagnosis. They often feel guilty and believe that the child's behaviour may be caused by them. Children with minor physical disabilities often have their problems underestimated. For the child and his/her family it is not a minor disability, but a major problem which may rule their lives. These children and their families require much support and the preschool plays an important role in bolstering their self-esteem.

The people in child care jobs in Sweden today work in difficult conditions often due to lack of and rapid turnover of personnel. The thought of enrollment of a disabled child sometimes becomes the 'last drop' for the staff. The staff have to get assistance with practical issues as well as having to deal emotionally with the disabled child. Many feel inadequate and insecure with the child and his/her parents. The staff may need help to develop a co-operative relationship with the parents.

Before a disabled child starts preschool the staff should meet the parents to discuss their expectations. Both the staff and the parents have expectations, although these are not always the same. It is important to be frank and explain one's thoughts and what goals to set for the child. The focus should be on the child. First impressions are important and when the parents meet the staff they often make their decision about the preschool. A positive and friendly first encounter with the staff will influence any future relationship.

The preschool is for all children in Sweden. Each child has a right to a good preschool. This means that a well developed educational and social activity should be offered as well as trained staff in charge of these activities. Integration as a concept may have lost it's meaning. Earlier the word 'integration' was used to stress a goal of participation and fellowship for all people in society. It may seem that the word is out–of–date since every child now is automatically entitled to a place in preschool. The educational activity should, however, be of such a high quality that it suits all children, including those with disabilities.

Disabled children have the same needs and the same feelings as all children. In some situations they also require additional support. It must be our goal to make preschool work well for all children; a preschool that meets the needs of each individual child.

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